

# At the End of the Day, an Actor: Interview with Tiago Rodrigues

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by Rui Pina Coelho\*

Tiago Rodrigues is not only the most reputed theatre maker in the contemporary Portuguese theatre and performance landscape. He is one of the most prominent European artists. His approach tends to be Wellesian, finding in acting, writing and directing his most visible expressive tools. Currently Artistic Director of the D. Maria II National Theatre, in Lisbon, his artistic path is a paradigm of the trajectory Portuguese performance has followed in the last decades: a theatrical landscape lit up by an experimentalist libertarian flame, heavily engaged in collaborative processes.<sup>[1]</sup>



Born in 1977, Rodrigues co-founded and directed, with Magda Bizarro, the *Mundo Perfeito* theatre company from 2003 to December 2014. Trained initially as an actor, he quickly became interested in the work of those who were renewing the theatrical framework, such as T G Stan, with whom Rodrigues has maintained a long-term artistic collaboration. First as an actor who wrote and often directed his own texts and, then, also as a writer-director—an unusual *écrivain de plateau*—his multi-layered artistic activity touches the heart of the European artistic theatrical tradition.



*Um outro fim para a menina Julia (Another End for Miss Julie)*, by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Helena Caldeira). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

### **The Artistic Direction of D. Maria II National Theatre**

Tiago Rodrigues' artistic activity over the last five years has been pretty much enwrapped in his work as Artistic Director of the D. Maria II National Theatre. At the end of his fifth year on the job, he makes a clear distinction between the objectives and goals established for his first three years and those that followed. During his first mandate (seasons 2015/16–2017/18), the accent was on opening the theatre's doors to a generation of artists that didn't normally present their work at the National Theatre and on finding strategies to diversify audiences. This led to a more risky and experimental programming and to a surprising conclusion:

The riskier the programme is, the more people come to the theatre. We were afraid that the number of spectators might diminish after one or two seasons, but the opposite happened. The more we experimented, the more the audience grew.



*Perigo Feliz*, by Tiago Rodrigues. École des Maîtres. Photo: pz

Notwithstanding the prioritization of these objectives, other goals were clearly pursued:

- to consolidate the work with performances for young audiences (particularly for teenagers);
- to “get out of the building,” and work with local communities, thus increasing the touring capacity of the National Theatre;
- to continue the investment in a solid editorial and curatorial line;
- and, most acutely, to push further the internationalization of Portuguese theatre.

All this came to transform the public perception of the role of the National Theatre in the Portuguese theatrical landscape.

Over the first three years we had the notion that we were using the international recognition of my work as a lever to internationalize the performances produced at the National Theatre in the hope that, in a very short term, more Portuguese theatre makers, through that internationalization, might find further partners and start building their own international path. That came to happen with artists such as Monica Calle, Raquel André, Miguel Fragata and Inês Barahona, among others.





*Sopro* (2017), by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Cristina Vidal). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

The second half of Rodrigues' Artistic Direction has been marked by a more focused effort at "cultural diplomacy," promoting not only theatre makers and performances, but also playwrights, envisaging the National Theatre as a "House of Authors."

Our project is a project of public service that wants to defend the sovereignty of artistic research, and therefore, a project where we understand public service as a place where artistic freedom, artistic research and authorial projects are protected. Projects that wouldn't probably survive in the "market." As far as concerns the relationship with the public, one thing that was surprising for us was to see that this approach led to an increased audience. But this increase could not be understood as infinite. So, one of our main goals for the second mandate was to address those that didn't yet perceive themselves as a theatre audience. This is to say that the potential spectator of this theatre is every person on Portuguese territory, whether a Portuguese citizen or not.



*Sopro* (2017), by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Cristina Vidal and Isabel Abreu). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

All these actions are part of a more general understanding of what “public service” means in a cultural institution.

We cannot subjugate the work of an artist or a group of artists to the purposes of a “public service.” That’s how the market works: it identifies a need and then produces goods for that need. A cultural public service needs to do exactly the opposite. We need to preserve the diversity of the artistic offer, and then promote the search for that offer.

### **The Role of a National Theatre**

These considerations clearly deal with the present-day role of a “National Theatre.” The heritage of national theatres as they were understood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—to build and preserve national identities—is still something worth considering, Rodrigues argues. But, he continues, this can be better achieved with a performance that deals with postcolonialism or with national memory in a dialectical approach.



*Como Ela Morre (The Way She Dies)*, by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Jolente de Keersmaecker and Pedro Gil). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

The work that a National Theatre can do is much more to question and to promote dialogue than to build a national identity within a specific territory and time. It doesn't exalt; it questions. Then again, that is the main difference between a liberal nineteenth century monarchy and a parliamentary democracy in 2019. That's the role of any "state theatre," not only a national theatre, but all theatres that are public institutions supported by central or local government. They must be a place for divergent and critical thinking. They must be places where we can defend a thinking that goes against a culture of efficacy, a thinking that doesn't need to be productive.

When Tiago Rodrigues was invited to be the Artistic Director of D. Maria II National Theatre, he was already a theatre artist with an international reputation, on the brink of more widespread global recognition. This position had, obviously, an impact on his career.



I had an independent theatre company where I'd worked for twelve years. Always with many difficulties—sadly, like many other Portuguese theatre companies. When I was invited to the National Theatre, I soon realized that the management, administration and programming were a very big component of the job—a job that also expects its occupant to continue doing his artistic work. Sometimes people tell me: “Now you can't focus on your creations. You have a theatre to direct with so many things to do!” And I usually answer: “First, I'm not complaining. It is a privilege to be there. When I had my own company, I usually spent seventy per cent of my time trying to find the money to work and thirty per cent of the time creating. At the National Theatre the equation is similar, with the difference that now I spend most of the time thinking how to share the theatre's artistic, financial and human resources with other artists.

This job was not something that I had on my horizon. When the invitation was made, after the initial shock, I thought it was something natural, something that I could do. A role that I could perform: the idea of being able to imagine a programme, a dynamic and a spirit of a theatre venue and to contribute to building a place of Artistic Freedom. There is no sign on the National Theatre facade where the words “National Theatre” can be seen. But if there were one, I would like to see “Artistic Freedom” written there. Artistic Freedom is probably the most important value to defend today. Nowadays, in order to defend Artistic Freedom, one must have many other essential things. Without proper work conditions, without funding, without proper support, without vision, without cultural policy, there will be no Artistic Freedom.



*Como Ela Morre* (The Way She Dies), by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Frank Vercruyssen and Pedro Gil). Photo: Filipe Ferreira

### On the “Thirty Per Cent”: The Performances

Tiago Rodrigues’ performances often start from a biographical note, a true story, a document, a relationship with an event or with the real, transformed through artistic invention and through the rhetoric of performance.

It is not something that I pursue as a thesis or a methodology. It is something that I notice. It often happens that I have found myself wrapped up in a performance that starts from something that I’ve seen, a reality that I’ve discovered, a public event that I’ve witnessed. It is not something that I think a priori: “that is the way I do theatre.” But *a posteriori* I recognize that I’m doing the same thing again. I saw a prompter and then I met her and I worked with her . . . and here I am, starting from Cristina Vidal’s life and work, creating a fiction [*Sopro*]; my grandmother asked me to advise her on the title of the last book she should read, because she was going blind and there I was, thinking how could I stage this story [*By Heart*].

Inevitably, my impulse to make a performance and to convince others to do it with me has to do with something that has happened to me, or something that I have read that happened to others. That is probably why, despite my gigantic will to stage other texts, I haven’t done it yet. Even when I deal with an adaptation, it is not only *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is not only [*Madame*] *Bovary*, it is not only *Anna Karenina* [the way she dies] that seduces me; it is my own relationship to those texts, or the links I establish between those texts and the realities that I observe.



*Como Ela Morre* (The Way She Dies), by Tiago Rodrigues. D. Maria II National Theatre (Pedro Gil, Isabel Abreu, Jolente de Keersmaecker and Frank Vercruyssen). Photo: Filipe Ferreira



Tiago Rodrigues' multi-layered theatrical activity is built around a triangle where acting, directing and writing are the vertices.

I continue to look at theatre from an actor's point of view. I try to write as an actor would write. I try to direct as an actor would direct. And what I value the most, in all the rehearsal process, are the actors. I write for the actors and through the actors. I direct in a constant dialogue with the actors. I think I have never told an actor, "You should do it like this." I can argue about what I'm looking for and why, but I have never had a "vision." I have zero imagination for that. I cannot visualize a performance. I have absolutely no image in my head before the performance exists. My performances are much more a consequence of the process (visually, its tone . . .). The process is not a path to arrive at the initial vision. I don't have a predetermined goal. What interests me is the process and I do truly believe that the rehearsal process will produce something.

Even when I'm writing. I have tremendous difficulty in visualizing what I'm writing. What saves me is that I know for whom I'm writing, and therefore I can imagine that a specific actor is saying those words to another specific actor. I see them chatting, but I have no idea what they are wearing, how the lights will be, the set . . . zero ability to imagine how things will happen.

Luckily, since I write a lot during rehearsals, there are sometimes samples available of the costumes or part of the set, so I can write of what I see and not imagine. In a sense, I write for actors in the way I wish others would write for me. And I direct in the way I would like directors to direct "me."

At the end of the day, when I check in at a hotel and I have to fill in the box which asks for my profession I write: "actor."

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#### Endnote

[1]This interview is the result of a two-hour conversation in Portuguese, subsequently translated by me. The selection and emphasis are my responsibility.

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Theatre Writing Laboratory of the D. Maria II National Theatre since 2015. Since 2010, he has been collaborating regularly with TEP—Teatro Experimental do Porto—as a playwright and dramaturgist.